

provides an ideal site from which to interpret the remarkable story of Alaska's bonanza railway.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For a more thorough analysis of the railway's regional impact, see Lone E. Janson, *The Copper Spike* (Anchorage: Alaska Northwest Publishing Company, 1975). For more on its construction, see Alfred O. Quinn, *Iron Rails to Alaska Copper* (Wilmington, NY: D'Aloquin Publishing Company, 1997).
- <sup>2</sup> William Douglass, "A History of the Kennecott Mines," typescript, Douglass Collection, University of Alaska-Fairbanks, 4. The Kennicott River was named for Robert Kennicott, one of the first Americans to explore Alaska. Kennicott's name was eventually given to the region's largest copper producer as well, but was spelled "Kennecott," the style later adopted by the Kennecott Copper Corporation.
- <sup>3</sup> Elizabeth A. Tower, *Ghosts of Kennecott: The Story of Stephen Birch* (Anchorage: Elizabeth Tower, 1990).
- <sup>4</sup> Woodrow Johansen, "The Copper River and Northwestern Railroad," *Northern Engineer* 7:2 (N.d.): 20; William R. Hunt, *Mountain Wilderness. Historic Resource Study for Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve* (Anchorage: National Park Service, 1991), 140-41.
- <sup>5</sup> Hunt, 141; Elizabeth A. Tower, *Big Mike Heney. Irish Prince of the Iron Trails* (Anchorage: Elizabeth Tower, 1988), 32-35.
- <sup>6</sup> Tower, 35-37.
- <sup>7</sup> Howard Clifford, *Rails North. The Railroads of Alaska and the Yukon* (Seattle: Superior Publishing Company, 1981), 148.
- <sup>8</sup> E. E. Swergal, "History of Alaska's Longest Railway," *Alaska-Yukon Magazine* 11: 2 (March 1911): 17-18; Johansen, 30.
- <sup>9</sup> William Alley, "Steel Rails and Ice: Alaska's Copper River and Northwestern Railway," *Railroad History* 168 (Spring 1993): 65.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.
- <sup>11</sup> George E. Mowry, *The Era of Theodore Roosevelt and the Birth of Modern America* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962) 250-57. A later, more complete, and better-reasoned examination of the issue in the 1940s cleared Ballinger of any wrongdoing.

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## Frontiers in Transportation

### Denali and the Alaska Railroad

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**D**enali National Park and Preserve is one of the oldest units in the national park system in Alaska, having been designated in 1917 as Mount McKinley National Park. Renamed Denali National Park and Preserve in 1980, the park is located in Interior Alaska and encompasses a large section of the Alaska Range, including Mt. McKinley, North America's highest peak at 20,320 feet.

Transportation and communication have always been among the biggest challenges facing Alaska. The geography and climate of the state are major impediments to the development of transportation and communications systems. Overland travel is extremely difficult in Alaska, with its rugged, mountainous terrain, deep river gorges, glaciers, permafrost, tundra and marshlands. Subzero temperatures and the deep snow of winter compound the geographic obstacles. Due to these conditions, it was not until the early 1900s, when interest in resource development was on the

rise, that any effort was made to improve transportation into interior Alaska and the Mount McKinley region.

The Act of 1912 granting Alaska full territorial status also authorized President Taft to appoint a commission to "examine railroad routes from the seaboard to the coal fields and to the interior and navigable waterways...which will develop the country and the resources...." The Alaska Railroad Commission (ARC) was appointed by the President to conduct this initial survey, and Secretary of the Interior Franklin Lane established the Alaska Engineering Commission (AEC) to select the final route.

Based on the information provided by the AEC, the route would run from the coastal town of Seward to the south and terminate at the mining community of Fairbanks in Interior Alaska; as it passed through the Alaska Range, its route paralleled the eastern boundary of the present-day park. Several railroads, running short distances, were already in existence along this route and



*The Alaska Railroad train as it approaches the train station in Denali, summer, 1999. Photo by the author.*

would eventually be incorporated into the Government Railroad.

The railroad route was built, for the most part, through undeveloped territory requiring the creation of an extensive infrastructure to support the construction activity. Supply terminals, shops, and freight yards had to be built; communication lines, construction camps, commissary and medical services also needed to be developed along the route to serve the needs of the employees. Several railroad camps erected along the route, such as Anchorage, grew into prosperous communities. Talkeetna, south of the park, and Cantwell and Healy, along the park's eastern border, are other former camps that continue to provide a sense of community in the park region.

Although the U.S. involvement in World War I pulled manpower away from the project and cost increases took a toll, 229.8 miles of railway and 30 miles of siding were completed by the end of 1918.<sup>1</sup> Construction progressed so that, by the end of 1920, 456 miles of track had been laid with an 80-mile gap remaining over some of the most difficult terrain. Construction of three major bridges and negotiation of the sheer wall canyon of the Nenana River would be required to close the gap. Hurricane Gulch of the Chulitna River and Riley Creek—very deep gorges to bridge—would require length as well as height. Of the two, Hurricane Gulch was undoubtedly the most dramatic bridging effort. The AEC hired the American Bridge Company to erect the bridge over Hurricane Gulch. Using the cantilever method of construction, crews worked from both sides, meeting in the middle, approximately 400 feet above the Chulitna River. Despite the difficulties of moving steel building material from one side to the other, anchoring and building backstays, and ensuring precise measurements so the two ends would meet exactly as planned, the project was completed in 60 working days.<sup>2</sup>

Another difficult section of track to lay was through the Nenana River canyon at the park's eastern boundary, north of Riley Creek. The steep walls of the canyon required a great deal of rockwork, which included blasting rock for the construction of three tunnels and chiseling a level roadbed on the canyon walls. By the end of 1921, the railroad clung to the canyon walls 200 feet above the rushing Nenana River.<sup>3</sup>

As segments of the railroad were completed, passenger, mail, and freight service were offered. In 1922, the first tourists to arrive by rail entered Mount McKinley National Park, having taken the train from Fairbanks, ferried across the Tanana River at Nenana, and continued again by train to McKinley Park Station. The last connective set of tracks was the Tanana River Bridge at Nenana, completed in early 1923. President Warren G. Harding drove the golden spike at Nenana on July 23, 1923, signifying the completion of the railroad. A month later, the Government Railroad was designated the Alaska Railroad.

The railroad had a tremendous impact on Interior Alaska and Mount McKinley National Park. It was the catalyst for the tourism boom. As historian William Brown has noted, the line connected "Alaska's interior with Seward's ice-free port; to Seattle and the rest of the world by ocean ships; increased communication via telephone lines constructed along the route and provided mail service; stimulated mining in isolated districts; spawned towns and agricultural enterprise; and revolutionized interior river transportation."<sup>4</sup>

Among the railroad communities developing along the route was McKinley Park Station. By the early 1920s, entrepreneurs Maurice Morino and Pat Lynch constructed roadhouses at the eastern entrance area of the park, anticipating the influx of both railroad workers and, eventually, tourists. By 1923, Morino's homestead included a large roadhouse on the present site of Morino Campground. Morino allowed others to construct cabins on his property, expanding his homestead into quite a complex. Duke Stubbs built a trading post there and established a fox farm by 1925. With the completion of the railroad in 1923, the park was finally directly accessible by rail. Dan Kennedy, a McKinley Park Station resident, obtained the first concession contract for the park. He established the Savage River Tourist Camp, 12 miles west of McKinley Park Station. Tourists were taken to the camp by



*Riley Creek Trestle spans one of the two most difficult gorges to be bridged by the AEC. Photo by Grant Pearson, 1933-1934, courtesy Denali National Park and Preserve.*

pack train where they enjoyed the natural wonders of the park. In 1925, the Mount McKinley Tourist and Transportation Company took over the Savage River Camp, expanding it to include a large dining hall and kitchen as well as a recreation hall complete with a dance floor, in addition to the wall tent accommodations. Stagecoaches and eventually buses were used to provide transportation to the camp from McKinley Park Station. The McKinley Park Road, constructed between 1923 and 1938, ran 90 miles from McKinley Park Station west to the Wonder Lake area and provided access deep into the park. The road connected the mining community of Kantishna to the Alaska Railroad and allowed for the development of a second tourist camp at Copper Mountain (now Mt. Eielson), some 60 miles into the park.

The Alaska Railroad was truly the lifeline of the park. Everything came to the park by train. All supplies, equipment, mail, livestock, stagecoaches, buses and automobiles arrived on the train. Local residents, park employees, territorial and federal officials, and tourists depended on the train to access Interior Alaska.

The tourist accommodations at Savage River and Copper Mountain (Eielson) were rather primitive, and by the 1930s pressure began to mount for hotel construction. Recommendations were made for a lodge to be built at Wonder Lake, in the heart of the park. In the 1930s, the Alaska Railroad proposed a hotel at the park entrance. Plans for Wonder Lake were eventually abandoned.

Otto F. Ohlson, General Manager of the Alaska Railroad, began discussions with the Interior Department for a hotel at the park entrance. In 1937, construction was finally begun using a \$350,000 grant from the Public Works

Administration. Ohlson arranged for the railroad to transport the building materials free of charge and the Alaska Steamship Company agreed to reduce its shipping rates by 35%. The hotel opened in time for the 1939 tourist season.<sup>5</sup>

Tourism came to an abrupt halt with the U.S. involvement in World War II. After the war, the park was once again on track as a tourist destination. Wartime construction of the Alaska Highway through Canada (Alcan) and the Glenn Highway connecting the Alcan to Anchorage provided an overland transportation route from the "Lower 48" states to Alaska. Slowly, tourists began to arrive in Alaska via automobile. But it was not until the Parks Highway opened between Fairbanks and Anchorage in 1972 that tourists began to arrive at the park via automobile in significant numbers.

Today, tourists arrive at the park in cars, trucks, recreation vehicles, and buses to make the trek into the wilderness of Denali. Travelers are treated to spectacular vistas and an abundance of wildlife as they slowly make the trip to the Eielson Visitor Center along the winding gravel road. With the increase in automobile traffic, the National Park Service has found it necessary in recent years to restrict the park road traffic to bus transportation as a means of maintaining the primitive condition of the road in order to provide the visitor with a true frontier experience. However, the Alaska Railroad remains a favorite mode of transportation to the park. Tourist companies include rail transportation as part of their travel packages, with hundreds of travelers arriving daily via the Alaska Railroad throughout the summer tourist season.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Joshua Bernhardt, *The Alaska Engineering Commission: Its History, Activities and Organization* (New York: D. Appleton Company, 1922), 33.
- <sup>2</sup> E.G. Amesbury, "Erection of Hurricane Gulch Arch Bridge in Alaska," *Engineering News-Record* 88:4 (1922): 144.
- <sup>3</sup> William H. Wilson, *Railroad in the Clouds: The Alaska Railroad in the Age of Steam, 1914-1945* (Boulder: Pruett Publishing Company, 1977), 79.
- <sup>4</sup> William E. Brown, *A History of the Denali-Mount McKinley Region, Alaska* (Atlanta: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1991), 104.
- <sup>5</sup> William H. Wilson, "Ahead of the Times: The Alaska Railroad and Tourism, 1924-1941," *The Alaska Journal* 7:1 (1977): 23.

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